



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Maxed Out

Who has the busiest fire company in the entire United States? As if the writing of this column I am not entirely sure but I am sure there is a magazine somewhere that has published it. Most likely it will be Firehouse or Fire Engineering. Moreover, I am pretty sure that whoever the firefighters are that work in that firehouse are probably pretty proud of that significant statistic. And I can probably make a couple of observations about that fire station that may or may not be accurate but I will try nonetheless.

One of the first is that wherever that company is located the reason that it has got such a high run load is because the community fire and emergency medical problem is quite severe. In general it is not the kind of place where the average citizen would want to reside. It is especially true if that person did not want to become injured or suffer a life and property through excessive fire damage. Fire companies that are incredibly busy like that don't tend to be in nice quiet suburban communities. They tend to be immediately adjacent to rough and tumble areas that are incredibly dense and complex. It should come as no surprise to most people that most of the high activity engine companies throughout the entire country are located in metropolitan fire departments not suburban ones.

My next observation that is very likely the company that we are talking about probably isn't working a 24-hour shift. It is incredibly difficult to sustain a specific call workload and remain up for twenty-four hours in a row. Busy fire companies have to have shift changes on a periodic basis. As a matter of fact I have read the accountings of a lot of very busy companies these shift exchanges more often go on in the field then they go on in the firehouse.

For the most part these incredibly busy fire companies are also not the place one goes for retirement. Firefighting is a young person's game for the most part. Granted there are some combat hardened veterans who don't mind working at firehouses like that but they are somewhat of an anomaly. More often than not the crews that staff these kinds of firehouses are individuals who are trying to acquire a lot of experience in a short period of time and possess a great deal of emotional and physical stamina.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Now for my next tough question. Who has got the slowest firehouse in the country? Hardly anybody every brags about that. As a matter of fact I don't think I have ever seen anybody put out a survey to try to identify twenty of the slowest fire stations in the country. As a matter of fact there is a good possibility that there could be some of them that could tie for that dubious honor. I have been around firehouses that not only don't roll a wheel for extended periods of time but also don't do much of anything else for extended periods of time. My best example of this was when I was visiting a fire department in which I was taken out the apparatus room. The fire chief was going to show off his newest piece of fire equipment to me and when he opened the door on the apparatus, a very extensive cobweb, complete with fly carcasses and dust pulled away from the steering wheel. Chances of that fire company making the top ten on anything were probably pretty remote.

And then there is the dubious middle ground. How busy does a fire company have to be in order to be so busy that it can't handle anymore? This is not a question that should be taken to lightly because it has a great deal to do with the concept of how productive a fire company is and how much its contributing to the fire and life safety in the community. It goes without saying that a productive fire company is one that makes a difference. However, the idea that companies do not respond to wheel or that they are in the field all of the time responding to trauma is not a real good indication of how effective a fire company is on maintaining the quality of life for those that they protect.

I would submit that the discussion of fire company productivity has essentially four sub components. The first of these is what I refer to as operational readiness. The amount of time it takes for firefighters to become physically fit to conduct training and make sure that apparatus is ready to respond it not a waste of time. Any time spent in assuring the operational readiness of a fire company is an investment in its capacity to perform under stress. The metrics of operational readiness are not the same as operational response. While we will discuss that a little bit later in this article operational readiness is evaluated by the personnel hours being devoted to specific functions as opposed to riding red iron into the field.

The second component is what I refer to as community readiness. This is time, energy and effort that are devoted to that fire company to assure that fire prevention practices are sustained and that the



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

community public education efforts are being incorporated. The performance metrics of community readiness have more to do with activity such as the elimination of fire hazards and the evaluation of community attitude towards fire. This area could include, but would not be limited to, such things as company inspections, pre-fire planning, neighborhood visits, and interaction with public education activities and such.

My third component is what I call operational response. This is what I call operational response. This is the part everybody really gets all excited about. This is the workload that emerges in a community that results in that fire truck and vehicle responding to a call for service. The performance metrics of this are relatively simple and yet at the same time incredibly diverse. On the one hand you have the issue of response time. A lot of ink has been spilled over this particular topic over the last couple of years. But even more important than response time is whether or not you can maintain operational readiness.

What I mean by that is that it is not necessarily how many times you go out the door that really indicates whether or not you are an effective fire company but rather you are ready to go out the door on each individual event without conflicts. To put it another way a fire company that is so busy that it cannot respond to multiple calls for service in its first in district may result in a second or even a third due company responding in on it which means that the whole concept of response time begins to deteriorate quite rapidly. Therefore, operational response capacity is basically limited to the number of first in events that you can handle within your first in district without having to relinquish that call to an additional resource from outside of your district.

My last component of station performance is the one in which some people get really uptight when you even mention it. I am talking about standby. What I mean by standby is that period of a shift in which firefighters are not doing any of the other three. Quite frankly this is an area that gets a lot of people agitated when it comes to talking about the effectiveness of fire companies when people are not firefighters. I am sure some of you have heard the snide remarks about firefighters sleeping in the firehouse at night, etc. On one level we might just right this whole debate of as being one of steady jealousy of those who don't enjoy the lifestyle of a firefighter. On the other hand we need to take into



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

consideration that this perception has had a lot of negative impact on the fire service and needs to be refuted at every opportunity.

So where does this all take us. What constitutes a productive fire company in a contemporary fire department? Is it one that doesn't do much except go to fires all the time? Is it one in which doesn't go to fires at all? Is it one in which the connotation of the firehouse is just another version of an old folks home? Obviously those are extremes that fall into the form of clichés. Communities are not interested in clichés. What they are interested in is coverage.

Therefore, I would like to postulate that a productive fire company is one in which the time allocated for a twenty four hour shift is equitably distributed among those four areas of capacity and evaluated on an annual basis. This philosophy basically looks at the fact that a fire company that is operationally ready working with a community to be prepared can respond effectively and provide twenty-four hour day coverage more economically than anything else.

The name of the game is balance. Balancing out the workload in a fire company requires that a department look at each fire company as a potential contributor to the overall capacity of the department in the first three arenas and then invest an incremental amount in assuring a twenty four hour a day coverage that is still the most cost effective way of doing their job.

When anyone of these three elements get way out of balance, then it becomes time for management and leadership in a fire department to start looking at mitigation. Let me use the most obvious example first. Let us say that you have a fire company that is literally running its wheels off. If one takes a look at fire statistics and notes that a fire company exceeds 2,000 alarms a year and if the average length of time on that alarm exceeds one hour in duration you have a potential for a company to be overloaded with response.

How do I know that? Well this is a mathematical game. Let us imagine that an individual fire company has approximately twelve hours a day to actually perform this function. Let us further assume that it has about twelve hours a day that will probably be more or less reserved for a standby capacity. Let us



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

assume that that same fire company has a potential of contributing four hours a day to operational readiness. That same fire company may have a need for approximately two hours a day for community readiness. This leaves about six hours a day to absorb response capacity. Six times 364 if you multiply that out you will find that it gets pretty close to about 2,000 hours in a year's period of time.

Now if you push this example a little bit more, let's say we double that amount of time that the company has devoted to calls. Raise it to 4,000 alarms per year. Now we need about 4,000 hours out of that company and so something else is probably going to have to give. Operational readiness may reduce or community readiness may be impacted.

If you don't think this is so, take a look at some of your busiest fire companies and you will discover that many of them do not have any involvement in pre-fire planning or company inspection any longer because of the heavy workload associated with response capacity. Ratchet that response workload up to 6,000 calls a year and you literally have a fire company that is overwhelmed.

In conducting surveys of departments all around the country I have developed a baseline from my own data that indicates that anytime a fire company approaches 1,500 alarms a year with an average on-scene time of 30 – 45 minutes accompanied with 30 –35 minutes worth of paperwork upon return that company is approaching limits to its capacity to be a balanced fire company.

When I was preparing this article I couldn't help but think about very specific fire stations that I have been associated with. I recall one we used to call "the farm". It was so slow that it took paint four days to dry. Yet also I heard that that Fire Company eventually was taken out of service moved further out in a different response zone and is now an extremely active fire company protecting the heavily industrialized commercial zone in the community that it serves. I am also reminded of "Engine Company 82". This company made famous by author Dennis Smith is not the same today as it was when it was written about. One of the reasons why, is the significant amount of fires that destroyed property in the area and in the redistribution and allocation of resources Engine 82 has reportedly gone by the wayside.



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When you look at engine company or truck company productivity I don't just look at one of these dimensions. In many ways looking at a productive fire company is sort of like comparing the statistics of a really good sporting team. It is not always the score at the end of the game that really determines who is the best at what they do. In baseball we often look at such vital statistics as hits, runs, strikeouts, errors bases on balls, etc. In the football metaphor we often look at first downs, conversions, and completions. The same thing might be said for an effective fire company. What really makes a fire company successful at the end of the discussion is one that significantly contributes to all four of these aspects of providing protection for that community.

If you are sitting in one of the firehouses that is on the extreme of this issue you may have reason for pride or feel significant frustration. Now when I use the word pride here I am trying to use it in the most positive way possible. Let's face it. Firefighters like to fight fire. Firefighters like to go on calls. Communities however could not stand a continuous assault against their life and property for an extended period of time. What makes a professional fire department is when it takes pride in its ability to deal with the issues but doesn't necessarily place total emphasis on response. Even those companies that are sitting in the lower level of response workload have an opportunity to feel pride too. Their pride can be measured with what they make in the way of contributions to the people they serve. Getting out of the firehouse and getting into the community is every bit as much a way of developing a relationship then waiting until the 911 line is accessed by someone who has suffered trauma.

If you are the chief of the department that has fire stations that fall into these various categories, you have a managerial challenge to try to achieve that balance that we are referring to. Do everything you can to support your heavily impacted companies. Do everything you possibly can to motivate your less productive fire companies. Pride is always to be found in performance.